N.Y. court to rule on gay marriages

Anne

Yancey Roy Matthew Daneman. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **04 May 2006**: A.1.

Abstract (summary)

Gay marriage is legal now in Massachusetts, and Vermont is the only state to recognize "civil unions," which give partners in gay relationships the same legal rights as married people.

Full Text

Yancey Roy and Matthew Daneman

Staff writers

Bess Watts and her partner last week celebrated the second anniversary of their symbolic wedding ceremony, held at Washington Square Park.

But later this month the state's highest court will consider four lawsuits that could give her another shot at marriage this time a real, legal one. If that happens, the Gates women "will be the first in line" to do it again, Watts said.

"We never really had a good reception. I want people to pay a dollar to dance with Anne," the 48-year-old Monroe Community College librarian said with a laugh.

For entirely different reasons, the Rev. Marlowe Washington also looks forward to the Court of Appeals beginning consideration of same-sex marriage cases on May 31, because the justices could chart a moral as well as a legal path.

"We are becoming a society that is going awry," Washington said. "Somewhere along the line there's going to have to be some authority that makes a decision of what is constitutionally right and legal."

It is one of the most contentious issues to reach the Court of Appeals in years four lawsuits from around the state involving dozens of gay and lesbian plaintiffs who have been denied marriage licenses.

Gay marriage is legal now in Massachusetts, and Vermont is the only state to recognize "civil unions," which give partners in gay relationships the same legal rights as married people. A number of states have passed referendums explicitly banning gay marriage.

In the Empire State, lower and mid-level courts have all agreed with Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, who has said that the state's domestic-relations law does not provide for gay marriage. In decision after decision, the courts have generally agreed that interpreting the law to allow gay marriage "represents a significant expansion into new territory which is, in reality, a redefinition of marriage," as Appellate Division Justice John Lahtinen wrote in February.

Despite his interpretation, Spitzer, who is running for governor, has said that the law should be rewritten to allow gay marriage.

Gay marriage proponents argue that a ban violates the constitutional guarantee of equal treatment under the law and serves no legitimate state interest. Further, they claim that marriage is a "fundamental right," a legal distinction that would make the marriage ban analogous to racial discrimination.

They cite a case called Loving v. Virginia involving interracial marriage. Virginia's ban on mixed marriages was rooted in tradition similar to bans on same-sex marriage but courts found that tradition alone wasn't enough to uphold the law, noted Elizabeth Bixler and Mariette Geldenhuys, lawyers on a case originating in Ithaca that involves 25 couples.

Meanwhile, a lawyer for the New York Catholic Conference said the state has a legitimate interest in marriage because of children.

"Marriage laws are not primarily about adult needs for official recognition and support," Richard Barnes wrote, "but about the well-being of children and society ... and affording the children the benefit of dual gender parenting. None of those interests would be promoted by the recognition of same-sex marriages."

For Watts, not being able to legally marry her partner of 11 years, Anne **Tischer,** is a frustration both financially because same-sex couples face expenses and legal vulnerabilities that married couples don't and emotionally.

"We're human beings. We pay our taxes," she said.

However, gay marriage "can mushroom into a whole society that has gone Sodom and Gomorrah," said Washington, pastor of Baber AME Church. "Same-sex marriage is wrong absolutely, positively, emphatically wrong. And even if the court system decides to say it is accepted in the state of New York, there will never be a (gay) wedding at Baber African Methodist Episcopal Church."

The Rev. C.M. Touchstone, president of the Greater Rochester Association of Evangelicals, believes state law generally opposes same sex-marriage.

"The statutes that are on the books have been found to be muddy but directional, in that marriage is between a man and a woman," he said.

And the legal and political battle fundamentally is not "a fight against sexual choices," Touchstone said, but "it's a fight to maintain healthy marriages and to create family units that are sustainable."

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Word count: **694**

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Demonstrators' message: Gay weddings our right

Sharp, Brian. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **16 Nov 2008**: B.1.

Abstract (summary)

TranslateAbstract

Brian Sharp Staff writer Standing in a drizzling rain on the steps of the Monroe County Administration Building, Ove Overmyer used a bullhorn Saturday to address more than 150 protesters rallying in support of same-sex marriage. Protesters cheered. [...] in the rotunda of the county office building, beyond the locked doors behind Overmyer, a heterosexual couple exchanged their wedding vows.

Full Text

Brian Sharp

Staff writer

Standing in a drizzling rain on the steps of the Monroe County Administration Building, Ove Overmyer used a bullhorn Saturday to address more than 150 protesters rallying in support of same-sex marriage.

Passing motorists blared their car horns. Protesters cheered.

And in the rotunda of the county office building, beyond the locked doors behind Overmyer, a heterosexual couple exchanged their wedding vows.

The coincidental contrast of the moment was not lost on Overmyer, who had helped organize this rally - one of many that occurred simultaneously from Los Angeles to Denver to Burlington, Vt., and Grand Forks, N.D. to Wichita, Kan., and Jacksonville, Fla. They rallied in protest of Proposition 8, a same-sex marriage ban adopted this month by California voters.

"People are angry, frankly, and this is history," Overmyer said of the first simultaneous nationwide action in support of same-sex marriage.

The crowd marched along West Main Street, carrying signs that read, "It's about love," and "My family matters, too." They chanted, "We don't need the state's permission. We are not second-class citizens." This rally, like the others, grew out of a grassroots, online effort, mainly using the social-networking site Facebook, officials said.

"We feel it's the social justice issue of our time," said **Bess Watts**, president of Rochester Finger Lakes Pride at Work. "I would love to see equality in my lifetime. I'm 51."

Watts said the issue comes down to benefits, in Medicare and Social Security, and in having your chosen partner at your side "when you take your last breath on Earth." She and her partner, **Anne Tischer,** were married in Canada 14 years ago. On Election Day, she joined Democrats downtown to celebrate Barack Obama being elected the nation's 44th president, then woke the next morning to learn of the decision in California.

"It was like a kick in the gut," she said. "It really put a mirror in my face, that America has a long way to go."

The state of New York has not legalized same-sex marriage but has a longstanding practice of recognizing marriages performed in other states and countries. Currently, only Massachusetts and Connecticut allow same-sex marriage.

Monroe County has waged a legal battle over whether it must recognize a Canadian marriage between two women, one of whom is a Monroe Community College employee.

The state Supreme Court initially ruled they were not entitled to benefits, but that was overturned 5-0 by the midlevel Appellate Division, Fourth Department, of the state Supreme Court. The county petitioned the Court of Appeals to hear the case. But the court ruled in May that the issue of damages has to be settled before it can hear the case. Neither side has taken further action to resolve the matter. Monroe County spokesman Noah Lebowitz said in an e-mail Saturday that the county has, "No plans to further pursue the issue."

As the nearly three-hour rally wound down, dispersing so the wedding party would not have to exit through the crowd, which reportedly cheered the couple when they arrived, Overmyer looked over what he said were "new faces," giving him new hope. He blames the California vote on older voters, with older beliefs.

"Sooner or later," he said, "marriage equality will pass. It will happen, because communities understand it is right."

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Word count: **551**

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Gay activists ready to fight for family's sake

Denise-Marie Santiago. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **06 Nov 2009**: B.1.

Abstract (summary)

The governor told gay activists last month that he intends to sign a marriage equality bill this year, and the Senate Republican leader is on record now as saying his people are free to vote as they wish if it comes to the floor.

Full Text

Matt Haag scored his first win to City Council this week, but the news was not all good for him on Election Night.

Haag, his partner and some friends were chatting at his home late into the night when he checked his BlackBerry and saw that Maine voters had repealed a same-sex marriage law.

"I thought the environment was right for this to pass," says the disappointed Haag, who is gay and hopes one day to marry his partner of a dozen years here, in New York, where they live.

And momentum was in the couple's favor, thanks largely to Gov. David Paterson's courageous declaration in the spring that he'd push state lawmakers to pass a marriage equality law as an issue of civil rights.

We all know too well what happened in Albany not long after that. As if we didn't already know that the nation's most dysfunctional legislative body was already in the dark, members of the Senate literally turned off the lights in chambers as they fought over party control of the agenda and the office space and even the keys.

The Assembly had already passed a bill allowing same-sex marriage, but the Senate failed to take on the issue during its paralysis in June.

What the marriage equality bill says is clear: "It is the intent of the Legislature that the marriages of same-sex and different-sex couples be treated equally in all respects under the law."

Anne Tischer of Gates knows better than most what those words would mean on a practical level. One friend lost her home because she didn't have access, as a spouse, to her long-term partner's pension when the partner died.

As a health insurance specialist, Tischer also saw up close the disparity between benefits available to heterosexual couples and to gay couples.

Wed to her partner four years ago in Canada, Tischer says she was depressed when Maine voters rejected its marriage equality law this week. "Everyone felt kind of stunned."

But she rallied with a group called the Civil Rights Front at the downtown federal building Wednesday to send a message to New York lawmakers who may be cowed by what happened in Maine or other places where marriage equality efforts have suffered setbacks.

If they vote against marriage equality or don't take action in the upcoming special session, Tischer predicts, "You will see civil disobedience ... I will be part of it. We have dozens of people already committed."

The governor told gay activists last month that he intends to sign a marriage equality bill this year, and the Senate Republican leader is on record now as saying his people are free to vote as they wish if it comes to the floor.

That was, however, before the Maine vote that emboldened same-sex marriage opponents, who also worked to kill a similar law in California.

But the governor and anyone else who believes in equal rights for all must stay strong in their efforts. That's true even as lawmakers take on the immense task of closing the multibillion-dollar budget gap.

"There's always going to be an excuse as to why it's not a good time," says Sue Cowell, who heads the Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley.

"Marriage strengthens family," she adds. "So why wouldn't they want to strengthen the family?"

Word count: **553**

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Despite defeat, gay-marriage advocates rally at Capitol

Mat, Cara. **The Journal News** [White Plains, N.Y] **24 Feb 2010**: AWP.7.

Abstract (summary)

Senate Democratic leaders continue to work on building bipartisan support for a marriage equality bill, "which guarantees dignity, equality and privacy under the law for all committed couples," said Travis Proulx, a spokesman for the Senate Majority Conference.

Full Text

ALBANY -- Some might think that two months after the Senate rejected a same-sex marriage bill and eight months before an election that could shift New York's balance of power isn't the best time to lobby on the issue, but gay-rights advocates disagreed Tuesday.

"Some organizations in this movement feel that being in Albany, even here today, may not have been the best idea. But, you know what, just because a vote can't happen this year doesn't mean we can rest," Ron Zacchi, executive director of Marriage Equality New York told about 100 members from Westchester County, Buffalo, Rochester, New York City and elsewhere in the state.

The Senate voted 38-24 in December to reject same-sex marriage legislation. No Republicans voted for it and eight Democrats, one of whom is no longer serving in the Senate, voted against it.

The Assembly, which is overwhelmingly Democratic, has twice passed legislation to legalize same-sex marriage, but the Senate has taken up the matter only once.

In November, voters will select representatives for all 212 seats in the Legislature. Gay-rights advocates have pledged to work against lawmakers who didn't support the same-sex marriage bill.

Michael Sabatino of Yonkers, and his partner of more than 30 years, Robert Voorheis, said they and other advocates are determined to keep the issue alive. The two were married in Canada several years ago.

"I think we have to stay in front of our elected officials, let them know that this is a very important issue, that we are expecting them to vote again on it in the future and that we are serious about getting this legislated here in New York state," he said.

Senate Democratic leaders continue to work on building bipartisan support for a marriage equality bill, "which guarantees dignity, equality and privacy under the law for all committed couples," said Travis Proulx, a spokesman for the Senate Majority Conference.

The Rev. Jason McGuire of New Yorkers for Constitutional Freedoms, which opposes same-sex marriage, said the legislation is a non-issue in 2010.

"There's zero chance that it's going to come up for a vote this year," he said. "It's just not an issue that people are going to want to touch again."

Anne Tischer, 58, of Gates, Monroe County, traveled to Albany on Tuesday because "without (same-sex) marriage, there really is no progress," she said. "Marriage is the brass ring and it will impact rights for all other LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) groups."

There are many rights that come with marriage, said Tischer, who married her partner of 16 years, Bess Watts, five years ago in Canada.

For example, the couple have to pay extra taxes on health-care benefits that Tischer receives through Watts' job, taxes that aren't levied on heterosexual married couples.

Word count: **460**

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Cuomo, Paladino try to put focus on pocketbook issues

Reisman, Nick. **The Poughkeepsie Journal** [Poughkeepsie, N.Y] **14 Oct 2010**: A.5.

Abstract (summary)

According to most studies, New Yorkers shoulder one of the highest property tax burdens in the country.\n

Full Text

ALBANY -- Gubernatorial candidates Carl Paladino and Andrew Cuomo took to the campaign trail Wednesday to pitch voters their ideas for reducing taxes and spending as both candidates try to refocus the race on issues.

Cuomo repeated his pledge to cap annual property tax increases at 2 percent, while also promoting his plans to consolidate local governments and ease mandates on municipalities. The Democratic candidate made stops at private homes in Rockland and Monroe counties.

Seeking to turn the corner from remarks he made last weekend that were critical of homosexuality, Paladino appeared in Boonville, Oneida County, on Wednesday and pushed for greater gubernatorial control of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which provides transit services in New York City, Long Island and the Hudson Valley.

"The MTA is horribly mismanaged, and it's a sinkhole of money," Paladino, a Republican, said in a statement. "It's among the least transparent entities in the world and was even found to have kept two separate sets of books. New Yorkers are paying more each year and getting less in service."

Paladino compared the proposed takeover of the semi-autonomous authority to New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg asserting more control over the city's public school system.

The proposal comes after Paladino received a wave of criticism this week for comments he made to a conservative Jewish group on Sunday that included warning against "brainwashing" children into thinking homosexuality was a legitimate lifestyle.

Paladino apologized Tuesday for the remarks and said his opposition to gay marriage is in line with the views held by President Obama.

But despite the apology, fallout from the speech continued Wednesday.

Rabbi Yehuda Levin, who had set up the meeting in which Paladino made the speech, pulled his endorsement of Paladino, citing the candidate's apology.

Groups protested for a second day outside Paladino's campaign headquarters in Buffalo, under the title "Embarrassed Buffalonians." A gay-rights group announced a protest today outside Paladino's campaign office in Brighton, Monroe County.

"Paladino touts bigotry and intolerance like he is proud of it," said Rochester activist **Anne Tischer**. "He cynically believes that it will draw voters to him."

The New York Daily News published a report Wednesday that found Paladino had rented space to two gay nightclubs in Buffalo as part of his vast property holdings.

Adding to his problems Wednesday was the release of more pornographic e-mails purporting to have been sent by Paladino.

The e-mails were posted on WNYmedia.net, a left-leaning Buffalo-based website that first posted in April a set of lewd and racist e-mails Paladino had forwarded. Paladino had admitted to forwarding the first batch and said he used poor judgment.

Michael Caputo, Paladino's campaign manager, dismissed the e-mails as "nothing new" and questioned their legitimacy.

"WNYmedia is a collection of Buffalo misfits and miscreants who are obsessed with Carl Paladino and pornography," Caputo said. "The Democrat activists have also been accused of falsifying emails in the past, and not just by Carl Paladino. They tried to derail our campaign once before with emails of questionable origin. Soon, the world forgot about them and they devolved once again into irrelevance."

Cuomo, meanwhile, said he had nothing to say about Paladino and focused instead on discussing the state's burdensome property taxes.

"This is not about the daily antics of Carl Paladino," Cuomo said in Rockland County. "This is a campaign for New York and the problems New Yorkers are facing -- including property taxes. I don't want to talk about Carl Paladino."

According to most studies, New Yorkers shoulder one of the highest property tax burdens in the country. An analysis by the Tax Foundation released earlier this month found that Westchester County ranks first in the nation for average property taxes per household, at $9,044.

Monroe, Niagara, Wayne and Chemung counties ranked one through four nationally for the percentage of taxes paid compared to home values.

"Property taxes are driving New Yorkers out of their homes," Cuomo said outside of the New City, Rockland County, home of Keith and Hollie Bialek. "This is an issue across the state."

If elected, Cuomo plans to push for a 2-percent cap on property taxes.

Word count: **688**

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Paladino protest calls for return to civility

Terreri, Jill. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **15 Oct 2010.**

Abstract (summary)

Protesters gathered outside the campaign headquarters of Republican gubernatorial candidate Carl Paladino on Thursday and criticized remarks he made that have caused an uproar in the gay community.

Full Text

Protesters gathered outside the campaign headquarters of Republican gubernatorial candidate Carl Paladino on Thursday and criticized remarks he made that have caused an uproar in the gay community.

Paladino has since apologized, but that didn't stop more than 25 people from standing in the rain on the sidewalk in front of the Buffalo developer's Brighton headquarters in the Tops plaza on South Clinton Avenue.

"We're really demanding a return to civility and sanity in our public discourse and in our government," said Todd Plank, president of Equality Rochester. "He does not represent the kind of change New Yorkers want in Albany."

Paladino's remarks, delivered to an Orthodox Jewish audience on Sunday, have caused a firestorm that the campaign has had to respond to daily since then.

"My approach is live and let live," he told the group, reading from remarks that were prepared for him. "I just think my children and your children would be much better off and much more successful getting married and raising a family. And I don't want them to be brainwashed into thinking that homosexuality is an equally valid or successful option; it isn't."

In an interview on CNBC on Thursday, Paladino said his words "could have been better chosen."

"I've been a high supporter of the gay community my entire career, and I will continue to be," he said. "The gay community in Buffalo knows that, they know my nature and they know the way I've been."

Protests were also held Tuesday and Wednesday outside his Buffalo headquarters.

Paladino issued a letter of apology Tuesday, but protesters said if he didn't mean what he said, they don't know when to believe him.

Anne Tischer of Gates said Paladino tried to conjure up "icky" images by talking about gay pride parades and the Speedos and "grinding" seen there.

"This is a tragedy that he's trying to go to that level of indecency simply to mobilize his base, and it's not working," she said, adding that she was disappointed in the Republican Party for supporting him. "Believe it or not, even gay people like to choose between candidates."

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Word count: **354**

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Letters to the editor: Collaboration is key to ArtWalk

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle [Rochester, N.Y] **25 May 2013**: 17.

Full Text

Discrimination in immigration deal

The immigration reform bill is ready for a vote on the Senate floor. Long a proponent of a path to citizenship for the millions of undocumented workers in the United States, I wish I could celebrate wholeheartedly. However, the deal was struck by trading away protections for bi-national same-sex married couples. Anti-gay discrimination due to religious bias was allowed to trump equal rights and compassion.

Bi-national same-sex married couples and their families are being torn apart without the usual accommodation made to other married couples. My Canadian mother faced no residency obstacles and was given priority to become a citizen when she married my American father. On the other hand, my English friend Jenn, legally married in New York to her lesbian love of eight years, is due to be deported and torn from the extended American family she loves. Her wife will have to give up her job, friends, visits with the grandchildren and home to follow Jenn overseas. It is cruel and unfair. Let the path to American citizenship reflect equality for all.

ANNE TISCHER

GATES

Word count: **764**

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Same-sex marriage advocates rally

Mat, Cara. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **24 Feb 2010.**

Abstract (summary)

Some might think that two months after the Senate nixed a same-sex marriage bill and eight months before an election that could shift New York's balance of power isn't the best time to lobby on the issue, but gay-rights advocates disagreed Tuesday.

Full Text

ALBANY -- Some might think that two months after the Senate nixed a same-sex marriage bill and eight months before an election that could shift New York's balance of power isn't the best time to lobby on the issue, but gay-rights advocates disagreed Tuesday.

"Some organizations in this movement feel that being in Albany, even here today, may not have been the best idea. But you know what? Just because a vote can't happen this year doesn't mean we can rest," Ron Zacchi, executive director of Marriage Equality New York told about 100 members from Rochester, Buffalo, New York City and elsewhere in the state.

The Senate voted 24-38 in December to reject same-sex marriage legislation. No Republicans voted for it, and eight Democrats, one of whom is no longer serving in the Senate, voted against it.

The Assembly, which is overwhelmingly Democratic, has twice passed legislation to legalize same-sex marriage, but the Senate has taken up the matter only once. In November, voters will select representatives for all 212 seats in the Legislature. Gay-rights advocates have pledged to work against lawmakers who didn't support the same-sex marriage bill.

Anne Tischer, 58, of Gates traveled to Albany on Tuesday because "without (same-sex) marriage, there really is no progress," she said. "Marriage is the brass ring and it will impact rights for all other LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) groups."

There are many rights that come with marriage, said Tischer, who married her partner of 16 years, Bess Watts, five years ago in Canada. For example, Tischer and Watts have to pay extra taxes on health-care benefits that Tischer receives through Watts' job, taxes that aren't levied on heterosexual married couples.

The Rev. Jason McGuire of New Yorkers for Constitutional Freedoms, which opposes same-sex marriage, said the legislation is a non-issue in 2010. "There's zero chance that it's going to come up for a vote this year," he said. "It's just not an issue that people are going to want to touch again."

Kitty Moran, 55, said she would be lobbying her own senator, James Alesi, R-Perinton, who was thought to be a supporter of the legislation but who voted no. "I'm not asking for the moon here. I'm just asking for basically the same rights that heterosexual couples have," said Moran, whose partner is Debbie Heintz.

Joe Tarver, executive director of the Empire State Pride Agenda, which wasn't a part of Tuesday's lobbying event, said if there's an avenue to get the same-sex marriage bill passed this year, the group will work on it.

The organization has an eye toward November, he said. "I know that one of the things that we're working on is getting more pro-(gay) marriage senators in that chamber," he said.

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Area supporters cheer right to wed

Gottipati, Sruthi. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **26 June 2011**.

Abstract (summary)

Saturday's celebration had a strong political flavor as LGBT community advocates listed those local officials who hadn't voted for the law (to many boos from the crowd), and encouraged attendees to rally for those who did.

Full Text

In a span of less than 24 hours, the crowd at Washington Square Park transformed from tense and emotional to proud and jubilant.

A candlelight vigil held Friday gave way to a euphoric celebration after the overnight passage of New York's same-sex marriage law.

Dozens gathered at the park to share their exhilaration about the hard-won victory, and to cheer the officials who passed the legislation.

"Our legislators listened to the will of the people," said Alden M. Bashaw, a program organizer for Empire State Pride Agenda, at the stage, before thanking officials who supported the law.

The state Senate vote makes New York the sixth and largest state in the nation to allow gay couples to marry.

"We just doubled the number of people who have marriage equality," said Anne Tischer, founder of Equality Rochester, a citizen action group devoted to Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender equality, and who has tirelessly campaigned the last couple of years to get the legislation passed.

Saturday's celebration had a strong political flavor as LGBT community advocates listed those local officials who hadn't voted for the law (to many boos from the crowd), and encouraged attendees to rally for those who did.

Advocates spoke of the need to bring same-sex marriage into the federal dialogue as well as to continue fighting for issues such as transgender equality. They expressed confidence about eventually gaining equality at the federal level.

"There's no stopping the movement at this time," said Tischer, 60, who plans to travel to other states as an organizer to help out, and expects to see steady progress in the coming years. She also plans to canvass and raise re-election funds for those officials who supported the legislation.

"I'm going to make sure that no one who has paid in rights for me has to pay a penalty," she said.

Tischer, like many others at the celebration, announced she would be renewing her vows with her partner Bess Watts, 55, this year.

Local opponents said they hoped to reverse Friday night's action.

"This is a travesty on a magnitude unseen before," said Michael Macaluso, 84, chairman of Citizens for a Decent Community, a pro-family group based in Rochester. "These people are infusing a morality in our state that is contrary to God's law."

Macaluso said his organization is looking to work with attorneys and other groups in the country on getting the legislation declared unconstitutional.

But at the celebration, couples who are new to the city said they were thrilled to be in New York at such a historic moment.

"We timed it perfectly," said Michael Sawzin, 24, who moved from Ohio and met James Sullivan, 23, who was from Tennessee, here last year.

The couple, who had relocated to attend the Eastman School of Music, started dating about five months ago, and said they enjoyed being in a community that is loving and supportive, and where they feel respected.

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ID_Code: A2201110106260341

Word count: **490**

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Protesters show support for family facing eviction

Mandelaro, Jim. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **15 Nov 2011.**

Abstract (summary)

Wells Fargo, the servicer of the mortgage, is the largest mortgage lender in the United States. A spokesman for Freddie Mac, which holds the mortgage, said that the corporation has a responsibility to taxpayers to mitigate its losses, which sometimes requires foreclosures.

Full Text

PITTSFORD -- They were young and old. Black and white. A few wore suits. Others wore sweatpants.

Each one had the same purpose.

"We're all taxpaying citizens of the United States," said **Anne Tischer** of Gates. "We are all being affected."

Added Lynn Giglio of Geneseo: "We are the 99 percent."

They were among about 80 other protesters who lined the sidewalk in front of the Wells Fargo office at 1200 Pittsford-Victor Road on Monday afternoon. They came to protest the scheduled eviction of Harold and Maria Steidel from their home on Clay Avenue in Rochester.

Harold Steidel, 56, came to Rochester from Puerto Rico in 1974. He worked for Eastman Kodak for 18 years and eventually took over the family business -- Shadel, an outsourcing solutions company -- where he was president and CEO.

Shadel was named a Rochester Top 100 business in 2007, and Steidel's plan was to grow into a $50 million company with multiple locations.

Instead, Shadel closed in 2008 -- another victim of the economic recession. The Steidels now live on Social Security checks and Harold's disability checks.

"We continued working with Wells Fargo for the longest time," said Maria Steidel, 45, who emigrated from Puerto Rico in 1983. "But they sent us notices of auction, and then (in July 2010) they said our house had been sold."

Around the time the Steidels moved in 2008, Shadel went under. That's when, Maria Steidel said, they stopped making mortgage payments while trying to negotiate a modification that would allow for lower payments.

She said the mortgage was around $60,000, but it would now cost about $90,000 to reinstate, accounting for arrears and fees. Steidel said she and her husband were ready to meet the necessary demands, but by then foreclosure proceedings had started. It was not clear what action could still be taken now that the home is sold.

Wells Fargo, the servicer of the mortgage, is the largest mortgage lender in the United States. Officials at the Pittsford office declined comment Monday.

A spokesman for Freddie Mac, which holds the mortgage, said that the corporation has a responsibility to taxpayers to mitigate its losses, which sometimes requires foreclosures.

"We give our servicers broad authority to look for a solution to mitigate losses while enabling the distressed borrower to stay in their home, but that's not going to be possible in every circumstance, unfortunately," said Brad German, a spokesman who was familiar with the details of the Steidels' case.

The Steidels have continued to live in the duplex -- their daughter, son-in-law and grandson live in the other half -- while fighting for their house in court. Maria Steidel says the family has the resources to pay their mortgages but has been informed by Wells Fargo that they could be forced to leave their home by this Thursday.

The protesters were made up of several groups, including Band of Rebels, Take Back the Land Rochester and Occupy Rochester. They carried signs:

"Stay Human"

"Shame"

"Stop Bad Faith Evictions"

"Big Banks Killed Our Economy"

They chanted "They got bailed out! We got sold out!" It was a reference to the $25 million Wells Fargo received from the government during the height of the economic crisis in 2008. The San Francisco-based bank repaid the money the following year through a stock sale.

One of the protesters on Monday was Catherine Lennon, 50, who was evicted from her Ravenwood Avenue home last March.

Lennon and her family of 11 struggled with mortgage payments after her husband, Jascha Lennon, died of brain cancer in 2008. Lennon tried to renegotiate the loan to lower the payments but was denied by her bank because only her husband's name was on the deed.

She moved to a shelter before returning to her home on Mother's Day after persistent protests led her case to be championed by area politicians. "I'm here to show my support, because this can happen to anyone," said Lennon, whose case is in state Supreme Court.

Maria Steidel said she is confident she won't have to leave her home.

"I have hope," she said, "because I believe in God."

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ID_Code: A2-111150332

Word count: **693**

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Women denied license will marry today anyway

Memmott, Jim. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **29 Apr 2004**: A.1.

Abstract (summary)

According to statistics analyzed for www.ePodunk.com, a Web site of community information, Rochester has a comparatively high number of people living in same-sex partnerships. Varying opinions Rochester may be gay-friendly in many ways - two City Council members are gay and many companies offer domestic partner benefits.

Full Text

Jim Memmott

Senior editor

The music **on Anne Tischer and Bess Watts'** telephone answering machine is the song, "Going to the Chapel."

"Going to the chapel, and we're going to get married," sings Bette Midler in a celebration of marriage, love, spring and never being lonely anymore.

The song has special meaning to Tischer and Watts, who live in Gates and will be married in a religious ceremony at Washington Square Park at 2 p.m. today.

The ceremony won't have legal recognition, as same-sex marriages are not recognized by the state, and the women's request for a license Tuesday was declined by Rochester City Clerk Carolee Conklin.

Conklin says that they were the first same-sex couple to apply for a license from the city.

Watts and Tischer's very public marriage ceremony will add fuel to the already heated debate here over same-sex marriage.

The intensity of this debate has struck people on both sides.

"I believe in gay marriage," says Tischer. "But I never thought I would live to see it part of a national debate."

"This is kind of a ball that has taken off rolling down the hill like there's no stopping it," says Eileen Rochniak of Irondequoit, who opposes same-sex marriage.

Though they may be surprised that the issue is a national topic, people here are not surprised that the topic has taken hold in Rochester. According to statistics analyzed for www.ePodunk.com, a Web site of community information, Rochester has a comparatively high number of people living in same-sex partnerships.

Rochester's score in the "gay index," a figure derived from responses to the 2000 U.S. census, was 161. This means the area is 61 percent above the national norm for gay and lesbian people sharing a household. Buffalo, by comparison has an index figure of 97; Syracuse is 124.

"Rochester is one of the most unique cities in the world," says Chuck Bowen, the head of the Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley. "It's very affirming and accepting."

Varying opinions

Rochester may be gay-friendly in many ways - two City Council members are gay and many companies offer domestic partner benefits. However, there is clearly opposition here to gay marriage, as there is opposition nationally.

A Los Angeles Times poll last month found 55 percent of Americans opposed gay marriage and 41 percent favored it.

Central to the opposition by some people is a belief that the Bible condemns same-sex relationships, defining marriage as a union of a woman and a man for the purpose of having children.

Supporters of same-sex marriage say that the biblical injunctions are, in effect, taken out of context and that the Bible itself has been subject to a variety of interpretations over time.

They argue, also, that marriage is not exclusively for couples who want to have children or who can have children.

In addition, they note that many gay and lesbian people may actually be viewing marriage more seriously than many heterosexuals, many of whom are living together without marrying, others of whom are divorcing.

"Britney Spears made a mockery out of marriage," says Bowen, noting the singer's Jan. 3 wedding that was quickly followed by her Jan. 5 annulment.

Pastor Donald Boldt of Bethel Christian Fellowship in Rochester agrees that marriage now is not a perfect institution. However, he doesn't support same-sex marriages.

"Marriage is in trouble," he says, "but I don't see that as a way to improve things for marriage."

Boldt says he is concerned about the pace and the polarized tone of the debate over same-sex marriage.

"This is not something you jump into," he says. "You're talking about changing things that are the support of civilization. Let's have a discussion about this, an open discussion, so we can at least hear everyone who wants to be heard on this before we make a decision."

Lifestyle vs. orientation

Rochniak, who is married with two adult children, argues that to endorse same-sex marriage would be to endorse homosexuality. It's a condition that she believes to be both sinful - in biblical terms - and a matter of choice.

"It's become common to discuss homosexuality and say it's the way they are born," she says. " My point would be to say there's no science for that, no tests. What you're basically going on is people's word."

The Rev. Michael Warren, an elder and former pastor of Christ Community Church in Brockport, agrees.

"A lot of the push concerning same-sex marriage isn't about equality, because they are protected under the law,'" he says. "It's about validation of a lifestyle."

Watts objects to the theory that suggests she chose to be a lesbian.

"My argument is, God created me," she says. "I know I was born gay."

A librarian at Monroe Community College in Brighton, Watts, 46, grew up in Utah and Washington state and then joined the U.S. Army, serving for six years.

Tischer, 52, grew up in the Rochester area and works for The Health Association.

"We are blue-collar people, we have blue-collar sensibilities," says Tischer, noting that they garden, worry about their mortgage and attend church regularly.

The women are members of Open Arms Metropolitan Community Church in Rochester, a congregation that welcomes gay and lesbian people.

The Rev. Jim Mulcahy, the church's interim pastor, who has officiated at many same-sex weddings, will perform their wedding ceremony.

Mulcahy said that several other ministers and at least one rabbi will attend the service to show support for same-sex marriage equality.

"We want to make a point that many local clergy perform these kind of ceremonies and that we believe it is an injustice for the state to deny equality to same-sex couples," he said.

In explaining why they are having the religious ceremony even though it won't have legal force, Watts and Tischer stress that it will have both public and personal meaning.

"We want to show support for marriage equality," Watts says. "And for Anne and me, it's the real thing."

Tischer adds, "For me personally the wedding's statement is the ability of two hearts to love each other. That can't be ruled by a legislature. That's something that's given as a gift of God."

Later this year, the couple hopes to be wed in Massachusetts, where same-sex marriages will become legal May 17.

The governor of Massachusetts has said that out-of-state couples won't be allowed to wed, though several groups and individuals have said they would challenge his interpretation of the law.

A civil right?

The women emphasize that because they cannot be legally married here, they face hurdles and inequities not faced by married heterosexual couples.

They argue that marriage clarifies everything from inheritance rights to health proxies. It makes jointly owning a home easier and it gives surviving partners access to benefits such as Social Security pensions.

"We want the legal security of marriage," Tischer says.

Jennifer L. Gravitz, a lawyer here who works with many gay and lesbian couples, says that the legal rights extended to married couples are almost too extensive to enumerate.

"For 240 years, the word 'marriage' has been recognized and built into our system," says Gravitz, who was married to her partner in Canada after same-sex marriages became legal there last year.

More than 40 states have laws or phrases in their constitutions that clearly state that marriage is between men and women. Some of the legal challenges to this definition argue that it discriminates against same-sex couples, as it denies them the benefits given to opposite-sex couples.

This civil rights or fairness argument has yet to be decided by the courts, says David B. Filvaroff, who teaches a seminar on civil rights at the State University at Buffalo Law School. "It's new territory," he says. "And I think there will be continuing litigation about it unless and until it gets to the Supreme Court."

Warren, the minister, sees the civil rights argument as a reach.

"I think that's offensive to those of color and to those who have faced horrible discrimination throughout their lives," says Warren. "To cast it as a civil rights issue is to do a disservice to those who have been persecuted."

Bob Day, 67, of East Bloomfield, Ontario County, is both African-American and gay. Looking back on his life, Day can point to cases in which he has been discriminated against because he is African-American and other cases because he is gay. In both cases, he argues, his civil rights were denied.

"When you suffer the lash, it stings just as well if it's coming because of the color of your skin or because of your sexual orientation; it's just as painful," he says.

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What's next

Massachusetts: Unless a court intervenes, same-sex couples could be eligible to be married in Massachusetts on May 17, making Massachusetts the first state to officially recognize same-sex marriages. Gov. Mitt Romney said over the weekend that the state will marry only couples who are residents of Massachusetts. His ruling will be challenged, say supporters of same-sex marriages.

Impact on New York: Under the 1996 federal Defense of Marriage Act, states do not have to honor same-sex marriages performed in other states. However, New York state Attorney General Eliot Spitzer has indicated that New York may honor the marriages. New York as a state does offer same-sex couples more rights than some other states do.

Court cases: The American Civil Liberties Union has sued the state of New York and the state Health Department, arguing that the denial of marriage to same-sex couples is a denial of basic rights. In another case, the mayor of New Paltz, Ulster County, faces misdemeanor charges for marrying 25 same-sex couples.

More court cases: Presumably, there will be lawsuits filed in various states on behalf of same-sex couples married in Canada, Massachusetts and other jurisdictions asking that these marriages be recognized.

Civil unions: Vermont remains the only state that grants "civil union" status to same-sex couples, giving them the same rights granted by the state to married couples.

Legislation: There are bills before the New York state Legislature supporting and opposing same-sex marriages. The bills on both sides of the issue are not expected to be approved.

Constitutional amendment: President Bush has endorsed an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would clearly state that marriage is between a man and a woman. Analysts say it is unlikely that the proposed amendment will receive the necessary approval from Congress. Coming up

Americans are deeply divided over same-sex marriages and on how the issue may affect this year's election.

PHOTO CAPTION

Anne Tischer, left, and Bess Watts, who plan to marry today, make cookies for their church in their home.

"For me personally the wedding's statement is the ability of two hearts to love each other," Tischer says.

ANNETTE LEIN staff photographer

PHOTO CAPTION

"This is not something you jump into," the Rev. Donald Boldt of Bethel Christian Fellowship says of allowing same-sex marriage.

DANESE KENON staff photographer

Gravitz

Day

Word count: **1828**

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FRIDAY FACEOFF: Gay marriage: THE WHOLE TOWN IS TALKING

Tischer, Anne. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **11 May 2007:** A.13.

Abstract (summary)

Lack of access to Social Security survivor's benefits and pensions, estate tax deferrals, workers' compensation, bereavement and family leave benefits, immigration rights, child support, custody and visitation rights has serious consequences for these families.

Full Text

Civil union is no substitute for marriage license

Anne Tischer

Carl Sandburg was once asked what he thought was the ugliest word in the English language. He thought for a minute and replied, "Exclusion."

For same-sex couples, being excluded from the rights and benefits of civil marriage has a profound impact on their ability to protect the security of their homes, families and relationships.

It deprives them of vital help in virtually every area of life, particularly during crisis or a loss. Leading organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, National Association of Social Workers and American Medical Association have called for the end of exclusion of same-sex couples from marriage because it harms families.

The Government Accountability Office has identified 1,138 federal protections attached to civil marriage, along with hundreds of state, local and employer benefits.

Marriage confers rights to make medical decisions, inherit property, acquire health insurance, jointly adopt children and get access to Family Court for domestic disputes. Lack of access to Social Security survivor's benefits and pensions, estate tax deferrals, workers' compensation, bereavement and family leave benefits, immigration rights, child support, custody and visitation rights has serious consequences for these families.

Recently a lesbian couple in Rochester suffered the consequences of the lack of marriage protections for their 29-year relationship.

When Lee developed cancer, her partner, Lori, was not entitled to sick time or family leave to care for her and had to take unpaid time, depleting their savings. When Lee died, Lori was not entitled to bereavement time from her employer. As Lori was not entitled to Lee's pension or Social Security survivor's benefits because they were unmarried, Lori had to move out of their home.

Bess, my partner of 12 years, and I likewise are vulnerable. We have tried to protect ourselves legally, but contracts and wills are no substitute for marriage. Civil unions do not equate to marriage. They create a legal boondoggle and perpetuate the stigma of second-class citizenship.

Civil marriage equality is not about religious ceremonies. As a gay Christian, I support freedom of religious expression, but recognize this issue concerns civil rights, not religious beliefs. Our Constitution was designed to avoid the danger of theocracy and to protect minorities from the tyranny of the majority. In the past, religious dogma was used to argue against civil rights for black people, women and other minorities.

Canada, Spain, South Africa, Israel, the Netherlands, Belgium and the state of Massachusetts have embraced full marriage equality and have not found that it negatively impacts the "institution" of marriage.

Hopefully, New York state will likewise recognize that when we help same-sex couples protect their children, build security for their homes, and flourish as individuals and committed couples, we strengthen our entire community.

Tischer lives in Gates.

Word count: **463**

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle [Rochester, N.Y] **18 May 2011**.

Full Text

It is time for marriage equality in New York

The time has come for full marriage equality for all loving couples in New York, regardless of sexual orientation. There is great value in empowering each and every person in our community to become all they are capable of. Each time we help a same-sex couple protect their children, build security for their homes, flourish as individuals and as committed couples, we strengthen our entire community. As a society we can use our energies to oppress people, or we can help them fly.

--ANNE TISCHER

GATES

Civil unions have few fans

Matthews, Cara; Gottipati, Sruthi. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **14 May 2011.**

Abstract (summary)

Greece resident Anne Tischer, who founded Equality Rochester, a citizen action group devoted to Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender equality, said legislators trying to pass civil unions instead of same-sex marriage legislation are pandering to both sides of the debate.

Full Text

Advocates for same-sex marriage and religious groups that oppose it can agree on one thing: Civil unions would not be an acceptable compromise in New York.

As Gov. Andrew Cuomo stepped up his campaign this week to legalize gay marriage, Delaware became the eighth state to allow civil unions for same-sex couples.

Gay-rights organizations in New York said civil unions are legally problematic, create confusion and don't carry the same weight or respect as marriage, while opponents say legislation on civil unions has been used as a stepping stone to marriage in other states.

Greece resident Anne Tischer, who founded Equality Rochester, a citizen action group devoted to Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender equality, said legislators trying to pass civil unions instead of same-sex marriage legislation are pandering to both sides of the debate.

"Marriage establishes kinship and is a recognized currency. ... That's the single most important reason next to the fact that civil unions have been a complete failure," said Tischer.

But the state Catholic Conference opposes civil unions "because frankly they really are no different than marriage," spokesman Dennis Poust said. "It's just a different name, and even more significantly, it's just a stepping stone."

Cuomo announced last week that gay marriage was one of his top three legislative priorities in the remaining weeks of the session, which ends June 20, and he began his "People First" tour Tuesday to drum up public support and put pressure on lawmakers.

A NY1/YNN-Marist Poll released Wednesday found that 50 percent of New York adults think gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to legally marry, while 25 percent said they would be OK with civil unions but not marriage. The other 25 percent said there shouldn't be any legal recognition given.

"We think anything less than marriage is discrimination," said Sue Cowell, 58, executive director of Rochester-based The Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley. She said civil unions don't offer the same protections and benefits as marriage does. "For retirement and ageing we have to plan differently."

Cowell, who's been in a same-sex relationship for 21 years, said marriage offers the chance to celebrate the relationship and make a public commitment.

Though the Assembly has passed same-sex marriage bills three times, it has stalled in the Senate.

Sen. Joseph Robach, R-Greece, Monroe County, said he would vote for a bill to legalize same-sex civil unions but not gay marriage and he has had that position for 10 years.

"I support civil unions, which would give people a host of benefits and protections without eroding traditional religious marriage," he said.

Jason McGuire, president of New Yorker's Family Foundation, said his group believes civil unions are "counterfeit marriages."

It's not appropriate to extend any marital benefits to any union other than a man and a woman, he said. "Civil unions are used as a fall back and then a stepping stone to get gay marriage."

McGuire is also executive director of New Yorkers for Constitutional Freedoms, an evangelical Christian lobbying group.

One of that group's board members, Pastor Vincent DiPaola of Lakeshore Community Church in Greece, said there might be a place for some form of civil union, but without the benefits of marriage.

"As a Christian leader, I believe gay people matter to God, God loves gay people," said DiPaola.

"But I do believe marriage is created by God, between Adam and Eve. For us to change it is very dangerous."

More than 700 clergy and faith leaders from around the state have come out in favor of same-sex marriage. Four of New York's neighbors -- Canada, Vermont, Massachusetts and Connecticut -- allow gay marriage. Connecticut, like Vermont, started with civil unions then adopted a gay-marriage law.

"We pay full taxes. Why not get a full marriage?" said Richard Esse, 64, of Irondequoit.

His partner Steven Freedman, 61, said legalizing same-sex marriage in New York was also important as it would be a step to get the federal government to do the same.

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ID_Code: A2201110105140330

Word count: **667**

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NEWS BEAT: Rally today backs gay marriage

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle [Rochester, N.Y] **17 Apr 2007**: B.4.

Abstract (summary)

"Same-sex couples pay significantly more in taxes and get none of the 1,138 federal benefits and protections that the General Accounting Office says are attached to legal marriage," said Anne Tischer, a coordinator for SAME, in a prepared statement.

Full Text

Social Action for Marriage Equality will hold a Tax Day demonstration from 5 to 6 p.m. today at the main post office, 1335 Jefferson Road, Henrietta.

The protest will call for federal and state lawmakers to permit marriage by same-sex couples.

"Same-sex couples pay significantly more in taxes and get none of the 1,138 federal benefits and protections that the General Accounting Office says are attached to legal marriage," said Anne Tischer, a coordinator for SAME, in a prepared statement.

[Bess]

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
Rochester Democrat and Chronicle [Rochester, N.Y] **13 July 2002**: A.9.

Full Text

Payback from pupils for their schooling

I found the July 3 letter regarding individuals with no children not having to pay school taxes fascinating. However, I have no confidence that lawmakers would be able to come to such a common-sense conclusion. Therefore, as repayment for the school taxes I pay, I propose that schoolchildren wash my car or mow my lawn.

BESS WATTS

GATES

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
Rochester Democrat and Chronicle [Rochester, N.Y] **31 May 2006**: A.11.

Full Text

Get to know gays before judging

I'm very sad for people like the May 10 letter writer who have the attitude that sexual orientation equals sexual perversion. She might want to approach my friend at the bedside of her 29-year partner who is dying of cancer to tell her she is a pervert. Or she could tell me, a responsible citizen who is punished with additional taxes when I provide my partner with health insurance benefits through my employer. Homosexuals have always existed and will always exist. Denying us equality is discrimination against a group of people, plain and simple.

From what I have learned of Jesus, he would be the first person to welcome us with open arms. I have also learned that it is too easy to place a group of people under one umbrella. I ask the writer to take the time to learn about and talk to gay and lesbian people; she will find that we are a diverse bunch and being gay is only a part of who we all are.

BESS WATTS

GATES

Local supporters protest decision, will continue fight

Livadas, Greg; Goodman, James. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **07 July 2006**: A.4.

Abstract (summary)
The court's decision means that same-sex couples can be denied health care provided by family plans, which tend to have reduced costs, and that they must pay an inheritance tax instead of having the legal protections afforded a spouse when a partner dies.

Full Text
COURT OF APPEALS RULES AGAINST GAY MARRIAGE

Greg Livadas and James Goodman

Staff writers

Protesting the ruling by New York's top court denying same-sex marriages, about 200 people gathered in Rochester's Washington Square Park on Thursday evening to express disappointment and outrage.

"We have a right to be angry. But angry isn't useful unless it is accompanied by hope," said Rich Ognibene, 43, of Rochester, a member of the Empire State Pride Agenda, which organized similar rallies across the state.

"This is an emotional issue for me and my family," said Kris Hinesley, executive director of the Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley. "It would be nice for my daughter to have legally married parents."

Many during the 90-minute rally agreed the next step is to sway state legislators to change the law.

"I just became a single-issue voter," said Jennifer Gravitz, a local rabbi and attorney. "You vote to protect my family, and I'll vote to give you a job."

Many others in the Rochester region supported the Court of Appeals' ruling.

The Rev. Carley M. Touchstone, president of the Greater Rochester Association of Evangelicals, said the decision "affirms that marriage is between a man and woman."

Touchstone, who also heads a coalition of churches affirming marriage, said he would urge the Legislature not to make any changes in the law.

Dominick Galvano, 56, of Parma was among those who rejoiced in the court's decision. "This is the way it should be. This is God's plan. God meant that man and woman should be united," he said.

The court's decision means that same-sex couples can be denied health care provided by family plans, which tend to have reduced costs, and that they must pay an inheritance tax instead of having the legal protections afforded a spouse when a partner dies.

Christine Voigt, 43, of Greece married her partner, Jo Meleca, last summer in St. Catharines, Ontario, where same-sex marriage is legal. They still must file their income taxes separately, each claiming half of their home.

"The only benefit I got in New York, I got a break on my car insurance through Allstate," Voigt said.

Several at the downtown rally waved signs and rainbow flags to passing motorists on South Clinton Avenue.

"Get mad. We're not second-class citizens," shouted Bess Watts of Gates. "I thought New York would be more egalitarian. I was surprised they would discriminate against a group of people. I was born gay."

Monroe County Legislator Harry Bronson, D-Rochester, called Thursday "a sad day for me and my partner of 15 years." He told the crowd that the definition of marriage has changed throughout history, including the overturning of laws that prohibited interracial marriage.

Regardless of the law, same-sex couples vowed to continue living and loving as they please.

"Our lives and our loves are like anybody else's," Gravitz said. "No one can take that away."

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Word count: **483**

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
Rochester Democrat and Chronicle [Rochester, N.Y] **17 Apr 2007**: A.11.

Tax time a painful yearly reminder

Today is the final day to file individual income tax returns in New York state. For many same-sex couples, it is a reminder that we are second-class citizens.

For those of us in committed relationships, we are forced to live a legal lie when we declare our status as "single." In my case, my partner of 12 years and I were legally married in Canada. Even in states that offer domestic partnerships or civil unions, we still have to list ourselves as "single," as the federal government does not consider us a family. The law allows heterosexual married couples to file jointly, which usually means lower taxes. In addition, those of us who use domestic partner benefits at work are penalized by having to pay taxes on benefits for our spouses.

When it comes to taxes, same-sex committed couples always pay more but get less because of discrimination in marriage. These are only a few of the 1,138 federal protections, rights and benefits denied same-sex couples (according to the United States General Accounting Office).

BESS WATTS

GATES

The writer is co-founder, Social Action for Marriage Equality.

Letters to the Editor:
Rochester Democrat and Chronicle [Rochester, N.Y] **05 Sep 2007**: A.9.

Inspiring words from an icon

I was delighted to read about the honorable John Lewis as written in an Aug. 31 column by James Lawrence.

John Lewis is indeed a man of great character and one of the few black leaders to speak out against homophobia and the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996. So often the gay community hears hurtful and derogatory words coming from some leaders in the black community, so as a lesbian I found it inspiring to hear Lewis speak out against DOMA with these words from the Congressional Record:

"I will not turn my back on another American. I will not oppress my fellow human being. I have fought too hard and too long against discrimination based on race and color not to stand up against discrimination based on sexual orientation."

I wish I had known that he was going to be at Hobart, as he is a man I greatly admire and want to meet some day. Thank you for a wonderful column.

BESS WATTS
GATES

Letters to the Editor:
Rochester Democrat and Chronicle [Rochester, N.Y] **13 Mar 2009**: A.7.

No wonder churches are losing members

I'm not surprised that religion has decreased in membership.

Today the word Christian is often in relation to exclusion rather than inclusion, hatred instead of love. Religion continues to force families to choose between their church and their gay and lesbian children. This was illustrated when Dustin Lance Black won an Oscar for original screenplay for Milk when he said, "To my mom who has always loved me for who I am even when there was pressure not to."

Churches can bring back members by simply embracing Jesus' words of "love one another as I have loved you."

BESS WATTS

ROCHESTER

Letters to the Editor:
Rochester Democrat and Chronicle [Rochester, N.Y] 15 Apr 2009: A.7.

Tax Day reminds us of inequality

Tax Day is here and I am reminded that my spouse, Anne, and I are legal strangers in the eyes of our federal and state government. We are a legally married same-sex couple, but we are forced into a legal lie as we must check "single" for tax filing status. We must pretend our finances and future are not intertwined and forgo access to the many economic safety nets our tax dollars fund such as Social Security survivor benefits, spousal inheritance benefits, Medicaid spousal benefits and the ability to file taxes jointly.

Gay and lesbian people need equal rights for equal taxes paid.

Equality demands repeal of the federal Defense of Marriage Act and passage of the marriage equality bill in the New York state Senate this year. Discrimination is taxing.

BESS WATTS

GATES

Despite defeat, gay-marriage advocates rally at Capitol
Mat, Cara. **The Journal News** [White Plains, N.Y] **24 Feb 2010**: AWP.7.

Abstract (summary)
Senate Democratic leaders continue to work on building bipartisan support for a marriage equality bill, "which guarantees dignity, equality and privacy under the law for all committed couples," said Travis Proulx, a spokesman for the Senate Majority Conference.

Full Text

ALBANY -- Some might think that two months after the Senate rejected a same-sex marriage bill and eight months before an election that could shift New York's balance of power isn't the best time to lobby on the issue, but gay-rights advocates disagreed Tuesday.

"Some organizations in this movement feel that being in Albany, even here today, may not have been the best idea. But, you know what, just because a vote can't happen this year doesn't mean we can rest," Ron Zacchi, executive director of Marriage Equality New York told about 100 members from Westchester County, Buffalo, Rochester, New York City and elsewhere in the state.

The Senate voted 38-24 in December to reject same-sex marriage legislation. No Republicans voted for it and eight Democrats, one of whom is no longer serving in the Senate, voted against it.

The Assembly, which is overwhelmingly Democratic, has twice passed legislation to legalize same-sex marriage, but the Senate has taken up the matter only once.

In November, voters will select representatives for all 212 seats in the Legislature. Gay-rights advocates have pledged to work against lawmakers who didn't support the same-sex marriage bill.

Michael Sabatino of Yonkers, and his partner of more than 30 years, Robert Voorheis, said they and other advocates are determined to keep the issue alive. The two were married in Canada several years ago.

"I think we have to stay in front of our elected officials, let them know that this is a very important issue, that we are expecting them to vote again on it in the future and that we are serious about getting this legislated here in New York state," he said.

Senate Democratic leaders continue to work on building bipartisan support for a marriage equality bill, "which guarantees dignity, equality and privacy under the law for all committed couples," said Travis Proulx, a spokesman for the Senate Majority Conference.

The Rev. Jason McGuire of New Yorkers for Constitutional Freedoms, which opposes same-sex marriage, said the legislation is a non-issue in 2010.

"There's zero chance that it's going to come up for a vote this year," he said. "It's just not an issue that people are going to want to touch again."

Anne Tischer, 58, of Gates, Monroe County, traveled to Albany on Tuesday because "without (same-sex) marriage, there really is no progress," she said. "Marriage is the brass ring and it will impact rights for all other LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) groups."

There are many rights that come with marriage, said Tischer, who married her partner of 16 years, Bess Watts, five years ago in Canada.

For example, the couple have to pay extra taxes on health-care benefits that Tischer receives through Watts' job, taxes that aren't levied on heterosexual married couples.

Word count: **460**

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Same-sex marriage advocates rally
Mat, Cara. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **24 Feb 2010**.

Abstract (summary)
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There are many rights that come with marriage, said Tischer, who married her partner of 16 years, Bess Watts, five years ago in Canada. For example, Tischer and Watts have to pay extra taxes on health-care benefits that Tischer receives through Watts' job, taxes that aren't levied on heterosexual married couples.

The Rev. Jason McGuire of New Yorkers for Constitutional Freedoms, which opposes same-sex marriage, said the legislation is a non-issue in 2010.

"There's zero chance that it's going to come up for a vote this year," he said. "It's just not an issue that people are going to want to touch again."

Kitty Moran, 55, said she would be lobbying her own senator, James Alesi, R-Perinton, who was thought to be a supporter of the legislation but who voted no.

"I'm not asking for the moon here. I'm just asking for basically the same rights that heterosexual couples have," said Moran, whose partner is Debbie Heintz.

Joe Tarver, executive director of the Empire State Pride Agenda, which wasn't a part of Tuesday's lobbying event, said if there's an avenue to get the same-sex marriage bill passed this year, the group will work on it.

The organization has an eye toward November, he said.

"I know that one of the things that we're working on is getting more pro-(gay) marriage senators in that chamber," he said.

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Word count: **457**

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New York votes to furlough workers one day next week
Spector, Joseph. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **11 May 2010.**

Abstract (summary)
Since the budget has been late since April 1, Paterson has submitted bare-bones, weekly spending bills to keep state government from shutting down.

Full Text

ALBANY -- The state Legislature on Monday approved a one-day-a-week furlough for state workers amid protests across the state and pending legal action to block the furloughs. Protests by the Public Employees Federation and the Civil Service Employees Association were held across the state, including in Rochester.

Gov. David Paterson has included the furloughs, which would begin Monday, in his emergency appropriations bill to keep state government operating because of a late state budget. It is believed to be the first time in state history that a furlough has been imposed on public workers.

Since the budget has been late since April 1, Paterson has submitted bare-bones, weekly spending bills to keep state government from shutting down. He has excluded aid for schools, local governments and nonprofits because he said the state doesn't have the money to meet its obligations.

Now, he has included the furloughs in the short-term spending bills as a way to save the state $30 million a week and put pressure on lawmakers and unions to find a compromise to help close a $9.2 billion budget deficit for the 2010-11 fiscal year, which started April 1.

If lawmakers had rejected the furloughs, they would essentially be shutting down government. Legislative leaders said last week they would begrudgingly go along with the governor's plan, even though they believe it is illegal to break union contracts. The Senate even passed a nonbinding resolution to declare the furloughs illegal.

But some Republicans said state government should be shut down to make a point that Democrats, who run state government, are not working hard toward getting an agreement. "It would be better to shut government down for a day to make the leaders do their job and get a budget done," Sen. Joseph Robach, R-Greece, said on the Senate floor. "People where I live expect us to do our job."

The measure passed the Democratic-led Senate along party lines, 32-29, with Sen. Thomas Morahan, R-New City, Rockland County, absent. It passed the Assembly, 82-56.

Paterson, speaking on radio programs Monday, said unions have refused his attempts to extract $250 million in concessions from them, such as a pay lag or passing on their 4 percent raises. He has already withheld their raises pending a budget deal.

The furloughs would affect about 100,000 workers and the days off without pay would be staggered through next week, determined by each agency. Paterson expects to continue the furloughs each week until a budget is passed.

"They are being asked to shoulder just part of the sacrifice we all have to make so the state doesn't become insolvent," Paterson said on WBEN-AM in Buffalo Monday morning.

State budget director Robert Megna said about 35,000 state employees would be exempted from the furloughs, including police, health-care workers and management employees.

He said the governor's office was reviewing what impact the furloughs would have on individual agencies and on state services. Megna said he expected the impact would be minimal.

PEF officials said they plan to seek a temporary restraining order to prevent the furloughs, and held rallies across the state. In Rochester, public employees rallied outside the Rochester Psychiatric Center.

Representatives from various public employee unions, not just those who represent state workers, joined them to show their support. The brief rally drew between 200 and 300 people.

"They're furloughing us for a day; they should be furloughing the state legislators," said Kathy Button of Dansville, Livingston County, who is president of CSEA Local 436, which represents workers who work with people with developmental disabilities.

Button said her members, some of whom earn $22,500 a year, will be hurt financially by the furloughs because they are deemed nonessential employees."The governor has made the public think the unions are the most horrible people in the world," Button said.

The furlough plan will likely end up in court.

"We're convinced a contract is a contract and it won't hold up," said **Bess Watts**, president of CSEA Monroe County Local 828.

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Includes reporting by staff writers Jill Terreri and Cara Matthews.

Word count: **676**

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Letters to the editor
Rochester Democrat and Chronicle [Rochester, N.Y] **23 May 2011.**

Churches have no right to prevent civil marriage

So many benefits and protections are provided by our government through civil marriage. If some anti-gay religious organizations want to dictate who gets married, then they should be the ones providing those benefits to married couples. Churches are tax exempt -- yet some of them are the loudest voices trying to deny taxpaying, same-sex couples the right to civil marriage and all the protections provided by our local, state and federal government.

Until churches and religious organizations pay their fair share in taxes, they should have no voice in denying civil marriage to loving same-sex couples.

--BESS WATTS

GATES

Responses to report on public employees: Editorial Page is anti-worker

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle [Rochester, N.Y] 28 Mar 2010.

Abstract (summary)

While every big company has been forced to downsize, reduce operating budgets, eliminate raises and cut benefits, your ranks have increased, budgets increased disproportionately, pay has steadily climbed and benefits not significantly affected.

Full Text

I'm disappointed with the bias demonstrated by the March 21 Editorial Page concerning public employees. The enormous illustration and caption were clearly anti-worker. In 1978, according to the Economic Policy Institute, the ratio of CEO salary to the average worker was 35 to 1; it is now 275 to 1. The working class is not the problem. Rather than write about jobs being shipped overseas, unregulated banks and Wall Street greed, it appears you find it easier to bash the public sector and pit worker against worker, taxpayer against taxpayer. Anyone can retire with a public sector pension: pass a civil service test, get hired and work 25-plus years. It is not an exclusive club.

-- BESS WATTS, ROCHESTER

The writer is president, CSEA Local 828.

Area supporters cheer right to wed

Gottipati, Sruthi. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **26 June 2011**.

Abstract (summary)

Saturday's celebration had a strong political flavor as LGBT community advocates listed those local officials who hadn't voted for the law (to many boos from the crowd), and encouraged attendees to rally for those who did.

Full Text

In a span of less than 24 hours, the crowd at Washington Square Park transformed from tense and emotional to proud and jubilant.

A candlelight vigil held Friday gave way to a euphoric celebration after the overnight passage of New York's same-sex marriage law.

Dozens gathered at the park to share their exhilaration about the hard-won victory, and to cheer the officials who passed the legislation.

"Our legislators listened to the will of the people," said Alden M. Bashaw, a program organizer for Empire State Pride Agenda, at the stage, before thanking officials who supported the law.

The state Senate vote makes New York the sixth and largest state in the nation to allow gay couples to marry.

"We just doubled the number of people who have marriage equality," said Anne Tischer, founder of Equality Rochester, a citizen action group devoted to Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender equality, and who has tirelessly campaigned the last couple of years to get the legislation passed.

Saturday's celebration had a strong political flavor as LGBT community advocates listed those local officials who hadn't voted for the law (to many boos from the crowd), and encouraged attendees to rally for those who did.

Advocates spoke of the need to bring same-sex marriage into the federal dialogue as well as to continue fighting for issues such as transgender equality. They expressed confidence about eventually gaining equality at the federal level.

"There's no stopping the movement at this time," said Tischer, 60, who plans to travel to other states as an organizer to help out, and expects to see steady progress in the coming years. She also plans to canvass and raise re-election funds for those officials who supported the legislation.

"I'm going to make sure that no one who has paid in rights for me has to pay a penalty," she said.

Tischer, like many others at the celebration, announced she would be renewing her vows with her partnerBess Watts, 55, this year.

Local opponents said they hoped to reverse Friday night's action.

"This is a travesty on a magnitude unseen before," said Michael Macaluso, 84, chairman of Citizens for a Decent Community, a pro-family group based in Rochester. "These people are infusing a morality in our state that is contrary to God's law."

Macaluso said his organization is looking to work with attorneys and other groups in the country on getting the legislation declared unconstitutional.

But at the celebration, couples who are new to the city said they were thrilled to be in New York at such a historic moment.

"We timed it perfectly," said Michael Sawzin, 24, who moved from Ohio and met James Sullivan, 23, who was from Tennessee, here last year.

The couple, who had relocated to attend the Eastman School of Music, started dating about five months ago, and said they enjoyed being in a community that is loving and supportive, and where they feel respected.

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Word count: **490**

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Letters to the editor: Hurtful words hurled by religious protestors
Rochester Democrat and Chronicle [Rochester, N.Y] **29 July 2011**.

Full Text

July 24 was a historic day for New York. Anyone who was at City Hall in Rochester could not help but smile at all the happy couples getting marriage licenses. I met couples who had been together 30 years and could not wait any longer. Around 2:15 p.m., protestors arrived with signs about biblical condemnation and shouts of "God will judge you for your sins!" We asked the couples to try and ignore the spiritual violence directed toward us as we escorted them to their car or the reception at the local church -- it was hard and very painful on what should have been a joyous occasion.

This fabulous day was selfishly ruined by so-called Christians who gleefully shouted vile things toward loving couples who only wanted what most Americans want -- someone to love, honor and cherish till death do us part.

--BESS WATTS

GATES

Letters to the editor
Andersonx. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **23 June 2013:** 27.

Waiting on the high court is difficult

The waiting is hard. Same-sex couples are holding their breath as we watch for U.S. Supreme Court rulings on the constitutionality of the federal Defense of Marriage Act and California's Proposition 8. The rulings will change our lives.

If you have never been on the receiving end of discrimination and second-class citizenship, it may be hard to comprehend the damage that it does to personal and family well-being and security. In America, the sting of being designated "less than" and unworthy of equal treatment feels especially harsh. We learn that all people are created equal and deserve equal treatment under the law.

We will see. In the meantime, bi-national same-sex couples remain targets of immigration discrimination, married same-sex New York couples wonder if they will get all the 1,138 federal rights and benefits that their neighbors get, including equal taxation and spousal protections. And couples in Missouri wonder if they will ever be able to celebrate their love and commitment in a hometown wedding. The waiting is hard.

BESS WATTS

GATES

Number of same-sex households on the rise

Matthews, Cara. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **14 July 2011**.

Abstract (summary)

Gay-rights advocates said the movement to legalize same-sex marriage in states made couples proud to discuss their relationships. Because of the passage of same-sex marriage in New York, "I feel I have a legitimacy to be part of conversation that I may not have been able to feel in the past," said Scott Fearing of Rochester, program director for the Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley.

Full Text

ALBANY -- The number of New York households led by same-sex couples soared by 40 percent to 65,303 between 2000 and 2010, according to U.S. census data released today.

Households with same-sex partners increased from 1.3 percent of all households in 2000 to 1.8 percent in 2010, the Census Bureau found.

While half of all such couples live in New York City, there is a significant number of gay households upstate. Rochester had the fourth-largest population with 989 same-sex households last year. Buffalo was fifth with 973, and Yonkers ranked ninth with 605.

In Tompkins County, home to the city of Ithaca, 3 percent of all households are headed by same-sex couples, the highest percentage in upstate New York and second only to Manhattan's 5.4 percent. Genesee County has the second-lowest concentration of all counties at 0.85 percent.

The release of the new census data comes 10 days before New York becomes the sixth state to legalize same-sex marriage and as scores of gay couples prepare to take their vows.

The increase in the census numbers makes sense, said Ross Levi, executive director of the Empire State Pride Agenda.

"With each passing year, people are increasingly out in their family and their professional life and throughout their life, and that would transfer to the census," he said.

"Much more attention is being paid to the census as an important tool for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) advocacy, recognizing that data is power and decisions at the federal, state and local levels are often driven by that data," he added.

He cautioned that the numbers aren't a reflection of how many gay people are living and partnering in New York. The census does not track sexuality.

The census data show that more gay couples are comfortable reporting their status, said Richard Socarides, president of Equality Matters, a gay-rights group in Washington, D.C.

The Census Bureau found that 22 percent of New York's same-sex couple households are raising children -- 16 percent for men and 28 percent for women. This is the first time the census has numbers on children in those households.

The number of same-sex couples raising children is not welcome news to New Yorkers for Constitutional Freedoms, an evangelical group.

"While we realize that couples have the right to live however they choose in their own homes, they don't have a right to redefine marriage for the rest of society," said Jason McGuire, executive director of the Spencerport-based group.

Gay-rights advocates said the movement to legalize same-sex marriage in states made couples proud to discuss their relationships.

Because of the passage of same-sex marriage in New York, "I feel I have a legitimacy to be part of conversation that I may not have been able to feel in the past," said Scott Fearing of Rochester, program director for the Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley.

Local gay-rights activists also said the census numbers could be reflecting a growing acceptance of gay couples, which has led to more people being comfortable with their identity.

Gates resident Bess Watts, 53, an activist with Equality Rochester, said more gay people could be coming out because of the influence of media and television shows that portray gay people as normal citizens. Specifically in Rochester, she attributed the growth of the number of gay couples to several factors -- large local companies with inclusive policies, organizations like the Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley, and celebrations such as Pride Week.

Alden M. Bashaw, an organizer for Empire State Pride Agenda, said Rochester has a rich history of supporting social issues.

"Rochester has always been a leader," he said. "It only makes sense that it will be one of the places where LGBT couples choose to live."

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Includes reporting by staff writer Sruthi Gottipati, Gannett Albany bureau chief Joseph Spector and Tim Henderson and Leah Rae of The Journal News.

If you go

Pride Parade: The Rochester Pride Parade, featuring bands, floats, motorcycle riders and community groups, kicks off at 3 p.m. Saturday on Park Avenue at Brunswick Street; it will then proceed along Park Avenue to Goodman Street and north on Goodman to College Avenue and the Rochester Pride Festival site (behind Auditorium Theatre).

Pride Festival: The festival runs from 4:30 to 9:30 p.m. and features music, food and activities. Featured entertainers are Pepper Mashay and Melissa Ferrick. Admission is $8 ($5 for students with ID).

Pride Week: Concludes with the Rochester Pride Picnic from 1 to 7 p.m. Sunday at the Genesee Valley Park Field House, 1316 Genesee St. Events include entertainment, games, a volleyball tournament, activities for kids and food. Admission is $15 ($5 for students with ID). For details, call the Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley, (585) 244-8640, or go to gayalliance.org.

ID_Code: A2201110107140324

Word count: **796**

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County legislature approves MCC's 2011-12 budget

Terreri, Jill. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **10 Aug 2011**.

Abstract (summary)

The contribution for MCC is paid by taxpayers at a rate separate from the $8.99 property tax rate per $1,000 of assessed value paid across the county.

Full Text

Monroe Community College's 2011-2012 budget was approved by the County Legislature tonight amid concerns about its impact on local government finances.

The $123.8 million budget, which takes effect Sept. 1, raises the contribution from county taxpayers by $1.2 million to $17.9 million. It also raises tuition by $60 per year, to $3,060 for full-time, in-state students.

There is concern though about how the increase in the contribution from county taxpayers will affect town and county planning around a 2 percent cap on growth of property tax levies, which takes effect next year.

Town and county governments have not received a ruling from the state comptroller on whether charges levied by counties but paid at different rates in each city or town will count as part of the levy for towns or counties for purposes of the cap.

The contribution for MCC is paid by taxpayers at a rate separate from the $8.99 property tax rate per $1,000 of assessed value paid across the county. Instead, residents of each city or town pay for MCC according to how many MCC students live in their municipality.

Legislator Paul Haney, D-Rochester, said the county could be "taking the first chunk out of the property tax cap."

The county's tax levy in 2011 was $349 million and $1.2 million is about 0.3 percent of the levy.

Haney praised the college but voted against the budget, questioning MCC's decision to keep about $48 million in money market accounts earning minimal interest.

If the money was kept in Treasury bonds, it would earn enough interest to avoid the tuition increase called for in the budget, he said.

Legislature President and MCC Board Member Jeff Adair, R-Wheatland, disagreed.

"I don't believe it could have been avoided," Adair said of the tuition increase and increased county taxpayer contribution.

The budget was approved 22-7. Democratic legislators Haney, Carrie Andrews, Stephen Eckel, Glenn Gamble, Cynthia Kaleh, Calvin Lee and Saul Maneiro voted against the budget.

Also this evening, 6-year-old Connor Grossman of Penfield was honored for his fundraising in support of multiple sclerosis research. Connor has raised about $10,000 for the MS Society by selling paintings he has created with marbles that have been dipped in paint.

Anne Tischer and Bess Watts were also honored for their activism in legalizing gay marriage.

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Word count: **386**

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Pats on the back Other voices: Tax time is painful for us

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle [Rochester, N.Y] **02 Apr 2011.**

Full Text

Once again, it is tax time -- an annual event when the state and federal governments force me to lie by checking the "single" box on my income tax returns. My spouse, Anne, and I were married in Canada in 2006 and are legally recognized as a married couple in New York -- but not at tax time. We are told to disavow our spouses and to file our taxes as "single." This is dehumanizing and wrong. The psychological and emotional toll of discrimination is indeed taxing.

--BESS WATTS

Gates

Demonstrators' message: Gay weddings our right

Sharp, Brian. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **16 Nov 2008**: B.1.

Abstract (summary)

Brian Sharp Staff writer Standing in a drizzling rain on the steps of the Monroe County Administration Building, Ove Overmyer used a bullhorn Saturday to address more than 150 protesters rallying in support of same-sex marriage. Protesters cheered. [...] in the rotunda of the county office building, beyond the locked doors behind Overmyer, a heterosexual couple exchanged their wedding vows.

Full Text

Brian Sharp

Staff writer

Standing in a drizzling rain on the steps of the Monroe County Administration Building, Ove Overmyer used a bullhorn Saturday to address more than 150 protesters rallying in support of same-sex marriage.

Passing motorists blared their car horns. Protesters cheered.

And in the rotunda of the county office building, beyond the locked doors behind Overmyer, a heterosexual couple exchanged their wedding vows.

The coincidental contrast of the moment was not lost on Overmyer, who had helped organize this rally - one of many that occurred simultaneously from Los Angeles to Denver to Burlington, Vt., and Grand Forks, N.D. to Wichita, Kan., and Jacksonville, Fla. They rallied in protest of Proposition 8, a same-sex marriage ban adopted this month by California voters.

"People are angry, frankly, and this is history," Overmyer said of the first simultaneous nationwide action in support of same-sex marriage.

The crowd marched along West Main Street, carrying signs that read, "It's about love," and "My family matters, too." They chanted, "We don't need the state's permission. We are not second-class citizens." This rally, like the others, grew out of a grassroots, online effort, mainly using the social-networking site Facebook, officials said.

"We feel it's the social justice issue of our time," said Bess Watts, president of Rochester Finger Lakes Pride at Work. "I would love to see equality in my lifetime. I'm 51."

Watts said the issue comes down to benefits, in Medicare and Social Security, and in having your chosen partner at your side "when you take your last breath on Earth." She and her partner, Anne Tischer, were married in Canada 14 years ago. On Election Day, she joined Democrats downtown to celebrate Barack Obama being elected the nation's 44th president, then woke the next morning to learn of the decision in California.

"It was like a kick in the gut," she said. "It really put a mirror in my face, that America has a long way to go."

The state of New York has not legalized same-sex marriage but has a longstanding practice of recognizing marriages performed in other states and countries. Currently, only Massachusetts and Connecticut allow same-sex marriage.

Monroe County has waged a legal battle over whether it must recognize a Canadian marriage between two women, one of whom is a Monroe Community College employee.

The state Supreme Court initially ruled they were not entitled to benefits, but that was overturned 5-0 by the midlevel Appellate Division, Fourth Department, of the state Supreme Court. The county petitioned the Court of Appeals to hear the case. But the court ruled in May that the issue of damages has to be settled before it can hear the case. Neither side has taken further action to resolve the matter. Monroe County spokesman Noah Lebowitz said in an e-mail Saturday that the county has, "No plans to further pursue the issue."

As the nearly three-hour rally wound down, dispersing so the wedding party would not have to exit through the crowd, which reportedly cheered the couple when they arrived, Overmyer looked over what he said were "new faces," giving him new hope. He blames the California vote on older voters, with older beliefs.

"Sooner or later," he said, "marriage equality will pass. It will happen, because communities understand it is right."

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Word count: **551**

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Court taking up gay nuptials

Diaz, Fernando. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **31 May 2006**: B.1.

Abstract (summary)

Fernando Diaz Staff writer Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender New Yorkers have made significant strides in gaining civil liberties in the past few years, but today could open the door for a landmark change, as the New York Court of Appeals hears oral arguments on same-sex marriage.

Full Text

Fernando Diaz

Staff writer

Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender New Yorkers have made significant strides in gaining civil liberties in the past few years, but today could open the door for a landmark change, as the New York Court of Appeals hears oral arguments on same-sex marriage.

Men, women and children gathered Tuesday evening in the sweltering First Universalist Church of Rochester to denounce what they consider to be institutionalized discrimination that they want abolished.

The Rev. George Tyger said the sanctity of marriage had been challenged by hours-long celebrity nuptials and the estimated one million divorces that happen each year, long before the term "same sex" was put in front of it.

Speakers from several statewide and regional gay rights organizations argued that marriage equality is about more than just love, since many couples tie the knot in spiritual ceremonies or abroad.

What's at stake are the "1,800 rights that come with saying 'I do,'" said Nora Yates, field director for the Empire State Pride Agenda. Among them are access to health insurance, medical benefits and custody of children.

Ann Tischer and Bess Watts, of Gates, said the issue was about more than just love. After all, they exchanged vows just across the street from the church in Washington Square Park two years ago.

Tuesday they held a rainbow version of Old Glory at South Clinton Avenue and Court Street after the event.

"If Bess got sick, real sick, we could lose the house," said Watts, adding that they're seeking financial security as they age.

The court will hear oral arguments today on four separate cases that deal with gay marriage. In February, the state Appellate Division rejected an argument that New York's marriage law was unconstitutional because it did not allow gay unions.

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Find out more

Oral arguments before the New York Court of Appeals concerning four cases that deal with gay marriage will be Web cast live today at 2 p.m. at http://courts.state.ny.us/ctapps.

Word count: **328**

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N.Y. court to rule on gay marriages

Yancey Roytthew Daneman. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] 04 May 2006: A.1.

Abstract (summary)

Gay marriage is legal now in Massachusetts, and Vermont is the only state to recognize "civil unions," which give partners in gay relationships the same legal rights as married people.

Full Text

Yancey Roy and Matthew Daneman

Staff writers

Bess Watts and her partner last week celebrated the second anniversary of their symbolic wedding ceremony, held at Washington Square Park.

But later this month the state's highest court will consider four lawsuits that could give her another shot at marriage this time a real, legal one. If that happens, the Gates women "will be the first in line" to do it again, Watts said.

"We never really had a good reception. I want people to pay a dollar to dance with Anne," the 48-year-old Monroe Community College librarian said with a laugh.

For entirely different reasons, the Rev. Marlowe Washington also looks forward to the Court of Appeals beginning consideration of same-sex marriage cases on May 31, because the justices could chart a moral as well as a legal path.

"We are becoming a society that is going awry," Washington said. "Somewhere along the line there's going to have to be some authority that makes a decision of what is constitutionally right and legal."

It is one of the most contentious issues to reach the Court of Appeals in years four lawsuits from around the state involving dozens of gay and lesbian plaintiffs who have been denied marriage licenses.

Gay marriage is legal now in Massachusetts, and Vermont is the only state to recognize "civil unions," which give partners in gay relationships the same legal rights as married people. A number of states have passed referendums explicitly banning gay marriage.

In the Empire State, lower and mid-level courts have all agreed with Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, who has said that the state's domestic-relations law does not provide for gay marriage. In decision after decision, the courts have generally agreed that interpreting the law to allow gay marriage "represents a significant expansion into new territory which is, in reality, a redefinition of marriage," as Appellate Division Justice John Lahtinen wrote in February.

Despite his interpretation, Spitzer, who is running for governor, has said that the law should be rewritten to allow gay marriage.

Gay marriage proponents argue that a ban violates the constitutional guarantee of equal treatment under the law and serves no legitimate state interest. Further, they claim that marriage is a "fundamental right," a legal distinction that would make the marriage ban analogous to racial discrimination.

They cite a case called Loving v. Virginia involving interracial marriage. Virginia's ban on mixed marriages was rooted in tradition similar to bans on same-sex marriage but courts found that tradition alone wasn't enough to uphold the law, noted Elizabeth Bixler and Mariette Geldenhuys, lawyers on a case originating in Ithaca that involves 25 couples.

Meanwhile, a lawyer for the New York Catholic Conference said the state has a legitimate interest in marriage because of children.

"Marriage laws are not primarily about adult needs for official recognition and support," Richard Barnes wrote, "but about the well-being of children and society ... and affording the children the benefit of dual gender parenting. None of those interests would be promoted by the recognition of same-sex marriages."

For Watts, not being able to legally marry her partner of 11 years, Anne Tischer, is a frustration both financially because same-sex couples face expenses and legal vulnerabilities that married couples don't and emotionally.

"We're human beings. We pay our taxes," she said.

However, gay marriage "can mushroom into a whole society that has gone Sodom and Gomorrah," said Washington, pastor of Baber AME Church. "Same-sex marriage is wrong absolutely, positively, emphatically wrong. And even if the court system decides to say it is accepted in the state of New York, there will never be a (gay) wedding at Baber African Methodist Episcopal Church."

The Rev. C.M. Touchstone, president of the Greater Rochester Association of Evangelicals, believes state law generally opposes same sex-marriage.

"The statutes that are on the books have been found to be muddy but directional, in that marriage is between a man and a woman," he said.

And the legal and political battle fundamentally is not "a fight against sexual choices," Touchstone said, but "it's a fight to maintain healthy marriages and to create family units that are sustainable."

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Word count: 694

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Former soldier glad to see end of gay ban

Lamo, Ernst. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] 23 Dec 2010.

Abstract (summary)

Framing the issue as a matter of civil rights long denied, Obama said that the U.S. was a nation that welcomes the service of every patriot and believes that all men and women are created equal.

Full Text

Almost 30 years after her military service ended, Bess Watts occasionally reminisces about the fun she had in basic training. Enlisted in the U.S. Army from 1976-1982 and stationed in Germany, the phrase "lock and load" still rolls off the Rochester native's tongue.

After President Barack Obama Wednesday signed a new law that will allow gays for the first time in history to serve openly in America's military, another phrase came to mind: "It's about time," Watts said.

When Watts was completing her six-year military stint, the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" law was a decade away.

However, the jokes about gays that she heard while serving made her uncomfortable as a lesbian soldier. She said the constant uphill battle against ignorance and fear seemed to last a lifetime. But those feelings turned into pride as she watched Obama Wednesday discuss the end of the 17-year-old policy.

"He told positive stories about gays and lesbians who served and the soldiers who have been saved in battle by gay and lesbian soldiers," said Watts. "I was just very proud to hear the president say that before he signed the bill. I have gone through years of disappointment thinking this day would never happen but now I am so overwhelmed that I was in tears."

Framing the issue as a matter of civil rights long denied, Obama said that the U.S. was a nation that welcomes the service of every patriot and believes that all men and women are created equal.

"This law I'm about to sign will strengthen our national security and uphold the ideals that our fighting men and women risk their lives to defend," said Obama.

The new law ends a policy that forced gays to hide their sexual orientation or face dismissal. More than 13,500 people were discharged under the rule since 1993.

Opponents of the repeal have argued the move would harm unit cohesion and could prompt some to leave the services, but Obama urged those kicked out under the old law to re-enlist.

Watts said the small yet sizable shift in people's perception of gays occurred as more people stepped out of the closet.

"Before people just never knew who was gay. Then it became their mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, sons, daughters, friends and co-workers," Watts said.

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Includes reporting by the Associated Press.

Word count: **388**

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FRIDAY FACEOFF: Gay marriage ruling

Watts, Bess. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] 07 Mar 2008: A.7.

Abstract (summary)

[...] Monroe County gay and lesbian residents also pay taxes. [...] it is simple equity that gay and lesbian county employees get the same benefits for their families as those extended to their heterosexual co-workers, especially given the state law against workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Full Text

THE WHOLE TOWN IS TALKING

Denying benefits to gays will exacerbate brain drain

Bess Watts

Justifying Monroe County's plan to appeal the Martinez decision, whereby New York state recognizes same-sex marriages performed outside the state, County Executive Maggie Brooks said, "We must appeal this decision in order to protect Monroe County taxpayers. We cannot simply extend benefits to unmarried couples ..." However, Monroe County gay and lesbian residents also pay taxes. And it is simple equity that gay and lesbian county employees get the same benefits for their families as those extended to their heterosexual co-workers, especially given the state law against workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Rochester-Finger Lakes Chapter of Pride at Work educates legislators and unions about the need for domestic-partner or same-sex spousal benefits including health insurance, family and bereavement leave and survivor pension rights. Employees in committed same-sex relationships face benefit discrimination regularly. While heterosexual married co-workers get sick time or bereavement leave, many gay employees have to request "vacation" time for such purposes.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates that offering benefits for same-sex domestic partners of federal employees would increase the cost of those programs by less than one-half of 1 percent. Eastman Kodak Co., the University of Rochester and the town of Brighton provide these benefits, seeing them as good for employers and workers. Monroe County, by contrast, denies worker equity, fostering disrespect for those deemed "second-class" employees with "insignificant" families.

Today's thriving economies correlate to an area's ability to attract talented innovators. These "creative class" people value multiculturalism and see inclusion of gay people, in particular, as an index of their own compatibility to an area. Monroe County, struggling with job losses and "brain drain," has put another nail in the area's economic coffin. While county leadership persists in myopic provincialism, the region will continue its decline. Don't marginalize good employees; embrace them equally. Doing so benefits everyone.

Watts, of Gates, is president, Rochester Finger Lakes Chapter of Pride at Work.

Word count: **330**

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Women denied license will marry today anyway

Memmott, Jim. **Rochester Democrat and Chronicle** [Rochester, N.Y] **29 Apr 2004**: A.1.

Abstract (summary)

According to statistics analyzed for www.ePodunk.com, a Web site of community information, Rochester has a comparatively high number of people living in same-sex partnerships. Varying opinions Rochester may be gay-friendly in many ways - two City Council members are gay and many companies offer domestic partner benefits.

Full Text

Jim Memmott

Senior editor

The music on Anne Tischer and Bess Watts' telephone answering machine is the song, "Going to the Chapel."

"Going to the chapel, and we're going to get married," sings Bette Midler in a celebration of marriage, love, spring and never being lonely anymore.

The song has special meaning to Tischer and Watts, who live in Gates and will be married in a religious ceremony at Washington Square Park at 2 p.m. today.

The ceremony won't have legal recognition, as same-sex marriages are not recognized by the state, and the women's request for a license Tuesday was declined by Rochester City Clerk Carolee Conklin.

Conklin says that they were the first same-sex couple to apply for a license from the city.

Watts and Tischer's very public marriage ceremony will add fuel to the already heated debate here over same-sex marriage.

The intensity of this debate has struck people on both sides.

"I believe in gay marriage," says Tischer. "But I never thought I would live to see it part of a national debate."

"This is kind of a ball that has taken off rolling down the hill like there's no stopping it," says Eileen Rochniak of Irondequoit, who opposes same-sex marriage.

Though they may be surprised that the issue is a national topic, people here are not surprised that the topic has taken hold in Rochester. According to statistics analyzed for www.ePodunk.com, a Web site of community information, Rochester has a comparatively high number of people living in same-sex partnerships.

Rochester's score in the "gay index," a figure derived from responses to the 2000 U.S. census, was 161. This means the area is 61 percent above the national norm for gay and lesbian people sharing a household. Buffalo, by comparison has an index figure of 97; Syracuse is 124.

"Rochester is one of the most unique cities in the world," says Chuck Bowen, the head of the Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley. "It's very affirming and accepting."

Varying opinions

Rochester may be gay-friendly in many ways - two City Council members are gay and many companies offer domestic partner benefits. However, there is clearly opposition here to gay marriage, as there is opposition nationally.

A Los Angeles Times poll last month found 55 percent of Americans opposed gay marriage and 41 percent favored it.

Central to the opposition by some people is a belief that the Bible condemns same-sex relationships, defining marriage as a union of a woman and a man for the purpose of having children.

Supporters of same-sex marriage say that the biblical injunctions are, in effect, taken out of context and that the Bible itself has been subject to a variety of interpretations over time.

They argue, also, that marriage is not exclusively for couples who want to have children or who can have children.

In addition, they note that many gay and lesbian people may actually be viewing marriage more seriously than many heterosexuals, many of whom are living together without marrying, others of whom are divorcing.

"Britney Spears made a mockery out of marriage," says Bowen, noting the singer's Jan. 3 wedding that was quickly followed by her Jan. 5 annulment.

Pastor Donald Boldt of Bethel Christian Fellowship in Rochester agrees that marriage now is not a perfect institution. However, he doesn't support same-sex marriages.

"Marriage is in trouble," he says, "but I don't see that as a way to improve things for marriage."

Boldt says he is concerned about the pace and the polarized tone of the debate over same-sex marriage.

"This is not something you jump into," he says. "You're talking about changing things that are the support of civilization. Let's have a discussion about this, an open discussion, so we can at least hear everyone who wants to be heard on this before we make a decision."

Lifestyle vs. orientation

Rochniak, who is married with two adult children, argues that to endorse same-sex marriage would be to endorse homosexuality. It's a condition that she believes to be both sinful - in biblical terms - and a matter of choice.

"It's become common to discuss homosexuality and say it's the way they are born," she says. " My point would be to say there's no science for that, no tests. What you're basically going on is people's word."

The Rev. Michael Warren, an elder and former pastor of Christ Community Church in Brockport, agrees.

"A lot of the push concerning same-sex marriage isn't about equality, because they are protected under the law,'" he says. "It's about validation of a lifestyle."

Watts objects to the theory that suggests she chose to be a lesbian.

"My argument is, God created me," she says. "I know I was born gay."

A librarian at Monroe Community College in Brighton, Watts, 46, grew up in Utah and Washington state and then joined the U.S. Army, serving for six years.

Tischer, 52, grew up in the Rochester area and works for The Health Association.

"We are blue-collar people, we have blue-collar sensibilities," says Tischer, noting that they garden, worry about their mortgage and attend church regularly.

The women are members of Open Arms Metropolitan Community Church in Rochester, a congregation that welcomes gay and lesbian people.

The Rev. Jim Mulcahy, the church's interim pastor, who has officiated at many same-sex weddings, will perform their wedding ceremony.

Mulcahy said that several other ministers and at least one rabbi will attend the service to show support for same-sex marriage equality.

"We want to make a point that many local clergy perform these kind of ceremonies and that we believe it is an injustice for the state to deny equality to same-sex couples," he said.

In explaining why they are having the religious ceremony even though it won't have legal force, Watts and Tischer stress that it will have both public and personal meaning.

"We want to show support for marriage equality," Watts says. "And for Anne and me, it's the real thing."

Tischer adds, "For me personally the wedding's statement is the ability of two hearts to love each other. That can't be ruled by a legislature. That's something that's given as a gift of God."

Later this year, the couple hopes to be wed in Massachusetts, where same-sex marriages will become legal May 17.

The governor of Massachusetts has said that out-of-state couples won't be allowed to wed, though several groups and individuals have said they would challenge his interpretation of the law.

A civil right?

The women emphasize that because they cannot be legally married here, they face hurdles and inequities not faced by married heterosexual couples.

They argue that marriage clarifies everything from inheritance rights to health proxies. It makes jointly owning a home easier and it gives surviving partners access to benefits such as Social Security pensions.

"We want the legal security of marriage," Tischer says.

Jennifer L. Gravitz, a lawyer here who works with many gay and lesbian couples, says that the legal rights extended to married couples are almost too extensive to enumerate.

"For 240 years, the word 'marriage' has been recognized and built into our system," says Gravitz, who was married to her partner in Canada after same-sex marriages became legal there last year.

More than 40 states have laws or phrases in their constitutions that clearly state that marriage is between men and women.

Some of the legal challenges to this definition argue that it discriminates against same-sex couples, as it denies them the benefits given to opposite-sex couples.

This civil rights or fairness argument has yet to be decided by the courts, says David B. Filvaroff, who teaches a seminar on civil rights at the State University at Buffalo Law School. "It's new territory," he says. "And I think there will be continuing litigation about it unless and until it gets to the Supreme Court."

Warren, the minister, sees the civil rights argument as a reach.

"I think that's offensive to those of color and to those who have faced horrible discrimination throughout their lives," says Warren. "To cast it as a civil rights issue is to do a disservice to those who have been persecuted."

Bob Day, 67, of East Bloomfield, Ontario County, is both African-American and gay. Looking back on his life, Day can point to cases in which he has been discriminated against because he is African-American and other cases because he is gay.

In both cases, he argues, his civil rights were denied.

"When you suffer the lash, it stings just as well if it's coming because of the color of your skin or because of your sexual orientation; it's just as painful," he says.

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What's next

Massachusetts: Unless a court intervenes, same-sex couples could be eligible to be married in Massachusetts on May 17, making Massachusetts the first state to officially recognize same-sex marriages. Gov. Mitt Romney said over the weekend that the state will marry only couples who are residents of Massachusetts. His ruling will be challenged, say supporters of same-sex marriages.

Impact on New York: Under the 1996 federal Defense of Marriage Act, states do not have to honor same-sex marriages performed in other states. However, New York state Attorney General Eliot Spitzer has indicated that New York may honor the marriages. New York as a state does offer same-sex couples more rights than some other states do.

Court cases: The American Civil Liberties Union has sued the state of New York and the state Health Department, arguing that the denial of marriage to same-sex couples is a denial of basic rights. In another case, the mayor of New Paltz, Ulster County, faces misdemeanor charges for marrying 25 same-sex couples.

More court cases: Presumably, there will be lawsuits filed in various states on behalf of same-sex couples married in Canada, Massachusetts and other jurisdictions asking that these marriages be recognized.

Civil unions: Vermont remains the only state that grants "civil union" status to same-sex couples, giving them the same rights granted by the state to married couples.

Legislation: There are bills before the New York state Legislature supporting and opposing same-sex marriages. The bills on both sides of the issue are not expected to be approved.

Constitutional amendment: President Bush has endorsed an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would clearly state that marriage is between a man and a woman. Analysts say it is unlikely that the proposed amendment will receive the necessary approval from Congress. Coming up

Americans are deeply divided over same-sex marriages and on how the issue may affect this year's election.

PHOTO CAPTION

Anne Tischer, left, and Bess Watts, who plan to marry today, make cookies for their church in their home.

"For me personally the wedding's statement is the ability of two hearts to love each other," Tischer says.

ANNETTE LEIN staff photographer
PHOTO CAPTION

"This is not something you jump into," the Rev. Donald Boldt of Bethel Christian Fellowship says of allowing same-sex marriage.
DANESE KENON staff photographer

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